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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 002998

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HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: MONAGAS STATE: THE CHAVEZ MACHINE VS. STRUGGLING
OPPOSITION

REF: CARACAS 002963 (NOTAL)

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. President Chavez dominates the political landscape of the eastern plains state of Monagas and at this stage appears likely to carry the state of over 480,000 registered voters by a wide majority. Chavez' pet infrastructure projects and social programs in the state are having only mixed success, but they are fueling an artificial economic bonanza and political clientelism that strongly favors Chavez' re-election campaign. Moreover, despite competition between them, Governor Luis "The Cat" Briceno and Maturin Mayor Numa Rojas are throwing the full machinery of the state and capital city, respectively, behind Chavez' re-election campaign. While backed by resilient and committed activists, Manuel Rosales' campaign in Monagas so far appears to be hampered by in-fighting, residual support for abstentionism, and severely limited resources. End Summary.

Deep in Chavez Country

¶2. (C) Poloff visited Maturin, capital city of the eastern oil-and-gas and agricultural state of Monagas, September 25-26 and met with political party leaders, municipal officials, VenAmCham leaders, a USAID-supported NGO, opposition mayors from other Monagas municipalities, and (briefly) with Maturin Mayor Numa Rojas. Poloff also gave an American Corner-sponsored speech on the changing American workforce at the local Bar Association. Poloff's visit came on the heels of President Chavez's September 23 campaign visit to Maturin and Santa Barbara municipality. Virtually every bridge, highway ramp, streetside wall, and billboard in Maturin carried a pro-Chavez mural or message, including the slogan "Chavez Until 2021." Almost all of these street paintings were sponsored by either nominally independent Governor Luis "El Gato" Briceno or Maturin Mayor Rojas of the Fifth Republican Movement (MVR).

¶3. (C) Poloff visited City Hall to try to pin down a tentatively-scheduled appointment with Maturin Mayor Rojas. Rojas is widely perceived as a "hard-core" Chavista whose mayoral slogan is "The revolution within the revolution." He was recently replaced as head of the MVR in Monagas, reportedly after other Chavistas denounced him for dodging

corruption charges by accusing his critics of conspiring with the United States. He reportedly was recorded as saying, "If attacking Bush works for (expletive) Chavez, then it will certainly work for me!" City Hall, awash with red-shirted campaign workers, appeared to double as the Chavez campaign headquarters. Coincidentally, the Secretary General of the local COPEI party filed a September 23 complaint with the CNE alleging that the Mayor had made full participation in all Chavez campaign activities a condition for municipal employment.

14. (C) Two of the Mayor's staff aides, seated behind a desk bearing a small Che Guevara bust, told poloff that Mayor Rojas was not in, but would call later that day. He did not. By chance, poloff ran into Mayor Rojas at lunch on September 26 and asked about Chavez' visit to Maturin. Noting that Chavez informed him of his visit only 24 hours before, Rojas expressed satisfaction with the reported turnout of some 50,000 persons for the car caravan led by Chavez. Asked about a possible meeting, Rojas referred to Chavez' repudiation of "America's actions around the world" and said he was heavily scheduled with "campaign work," but said he would call later that day. He did not. The governor's office declined up front poloff's appointment request.

Spending to Win

15. (C) Maturin is enjoying a visible, but artificial, consumer boom fueled by public sector spending, according to VenAmCham leaders. The BRV is funding the construction of a 52,000 seat soccer stadium (Maturin is one of nine cities selected to host Copa America tournament games in summer 2007) and is working 24/7 to complete a long-deferred overpass on the city's main artery road. Construction is also beginning on the Venezuelan-Iranian joint Cerro Azul

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cement plant in Cedenó, the northern Monagas municipality from which Governor Briceno hails. At the same time, PDVSA is reportedly trying to squeeze off-line contributions from sub-contractors, ostensibly to fund BRV social programs, but allegedly to fill Chavez campaign coffers.

16. (C) The government-subsidized Mercal, located next to the recently inaugurated Bolivarian University of Maturin, had half-stocked shelves and had few customers. Outside the Mercal was a covered waiting area that could seat over 200 persons. These benches, it was explained, accommodate the twice-weekly rush for low-price chicken and whenever white granular sugar is shipped to the Mercal. A middle-aged, continuing education student of the Bolivarian University proudly reported that the university's classrooms were completed six months after Chavez announced the initiative. Some 3000 students will attend the university this year for what the Maturin director calls "citizen formation in defense of the revolution."

17. (C) While Barrio Adentro clinic construction in Monagas lags behind the rest of the country, a few clinics in Maturin are up and running with Cuban and Venezuelan doctors reportedly rendering services. By contrast, Accion Democratica Mayor of Acosta Jesus Velasquez said the several Cuban doctors assigned to his rural district have all abandoned their posts and are now "tourists." Accion Democratica Mayor of rural Punceres Municipality Tirso Sosa said the Cuban doctors in his district are disillusioned and considering trying to avoid returning to Cuba.

Not Even a Can of Paint

18. (C) Prior to being named the consensus opposition candidate, Manuel Rosales trailed Primero Justicia candidate

Julio Borges in Monagas and his supporters are facing considerable difficulty promoting the Zulia Governor's candidacy on the eastern plains. Rosales visited two barrios in Maturin soon after securing the support of Borges in August, but his supporters, who had only a few days to prepare the visit, considered the one-day trip only a small success. Rosales is planning a return visit the first week of October. The Rosales campaign team did not open an election headquarters, a small, brightly painted house, until mid-September. Finding a Rosales campaign poster in Maturin is akin to playing "Where's Waldo" in a sea of Chavez election propaganda.

¶9. (C) Passing over a long list of potential local campaign leaders, Rosales sent a Zulia administrator, and a former resident of Maturin, to head his campaign in Monagas. Local Primero Justicia (PJ) leaders complained that Rosales' Monagas campaign leader denied their requests to join Un Nuevo Tiempo buses going to a Rosales rally in Caracas (the buses reportedly went half-empty instead) and refused to give them funds or "even a can of paint" to place pro-Rosales political messages. PJ activists also said they could have greater success wooing voters in poor neighborhoods pitching Rosales' oil revenue redistribution idea if they had models of the debit card ("la negra") to show voters. COPEI party leaders affirmed their full support for Rosales, but stated flatly that they and Un Nuevo Tiempo lacked the resources to sustain a meaningful Rosales campaign in Monagas.

¶10. (C) Rosales is getting some informal support from Accion Democratica (AD), the party that traditionally dominated Monagas politics before Chavez. Former three-time AD Monagas Governor Guillermo Call and other prominent AD personalities are openly assisting the Rosales campaign. However, consistent with AD Secretary General Henry Ramos Allup's abstentionist policy, the AD party in Monagas is not lending institutional support to Rosales. Two local AD mayors told poloff that they are advising their constituents to abstain due to their doubts that the electronic balloting will be truly secret and immune from tampering. Noting that he has to cooperate with Chavez's supporters in order to secure benefits for his community, Punceres Mayor Sosa joked, "If anyone asks, I tell them I am the first Chavista."

¶11. (C) To date, there have not been any reports of electoral violence in Monagas. Ironically, political violence has been limited to pre-election clashes between supporters of Mayor Rojas and Governor Briceno. Primero Justicia leaders take credit for re-routing Rosales' marches through two Maturin

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barrios to avoid almost certain trouble in one Chavista stronghold. They said the Chavez campaign can deploy, if it needs to, a group of "dangerous" thugs. Chavez' anti-American, My-Country-or-Death rhetoric is also creating a climate of fear among the opposition. The same day poloff spoke at the American Corner, the ostensibly independent Journalists' Association submitted a complaint to the state legislature alleging that the American Corner is part of an American destabilization conspiracy.

Comment

¶12. (C) Monagas is not a representative test of opposition candidate Manuel Rosales' candidacy. The governor of the western state of Zulia was not widely known in the eastern plains state of Monagas before being named the opposition's consensus candidate. The state highlights, however, the difficulties Rosales continues to face in mounting a meaningful nation-wide electoral challenge to President Chavez. Chavez' popularity in Monagas has been eroded by the in-fighting and widely perceived corruption among Chavistas in the state. Nevertheless, Chavistas enjoy virtually complete control over government institutions, and they have

essentially merged local government with the president's re-election campaign. Backed by a public spending boom and a coercive electoral machine, Chavez appears poised to secure a mix of true believers and co-opted voters to secure a broad majority of Monagas voters. The struggling Rosales campaign is not only fighting the Chavez electoral machine, but also confronting a strong absentionist undercurrent among many of its would-be supporters.

BROWNFIELD